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ABSTRACT

A study of two teachers and two students at a large midwestern university examined student-teacher communication during individual conferences concerning student writing. Results may surprise even those composition scholars familiar with the research of Sommers (1982), Hayes and Daiker (1984) and Sperling and Freedman (1987), which suggested that students and teachers will often have different interpretations of written comments on student papers. In the present study, interviews with students and teachers after conferences revealed that substantial misunderstandings resulted even in the course of verbal exchanges. In fact, differences in perception encompassed not only misunderstandings in which a student did not grasp a teacher's point, but also a much broader range of beliefs, assumptions, motives and goals such as: (1) unbeknownst to the teacher, the student did not understand something the teacher said; (2) unbeknownst to the student, the teacher did not understand why the student did something in her draft; (3) the student and the teacher did not have a mutual understanding of what the other one wanted to accomplish, either in a particular conference or through conferencing in general. Further results from this study showed that these misunderstandings often led to or were symptoms of serious problems. Interviews revealed differences in interpretation on both a local and global level; what may have seemed like insignificant or limited misunderstandings, in fact, hinted at major differences in opinion about the value of the teacher-student conferences. (TB)

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"That's Not What I Meant": Failures of Interpretation in the Writing Conference

In view of research on written response done by Sommers (1982), Hayes and Daiker (1984), Sperling and Freedman (1987), and others, most of us wouldn't be surprised to hear that students and teachers often have different interpretations of teachers' written responses to student writing. Indeed, we often put more faith in our ability to "talk over" a paper with students, not only because we get the added context of tone of voice but also because students have the opportunity to ask us questions when they don't fully understand something we've said. We might, then, be at least somewhat surprised to find that students and teachers who regularly meet one-on-one can have just as divergent—even diametrically opposed—interpretations of their oral interactions. My study suggests that this may indeed be the case. I'll illustrate what I mean with two quotations from a student and a teacher who meet one-on-one every week as part of a basic writing class:

> T: I think I silenced her. . . . I sort of talked *at* her, or, you know, rather than *to*, telling her more what she should do, instead of . . . giving her ideas about what she could do or what she would want to do. . . . I was like didactic teaching. . . I feel like I spent too much time lecturing about the purpose of the paper, maybe, or steering her away from what she was trying to talk about.
>
> S: I think we basically both achieved our goals, to the fullest extent as we could. . . . This [conference] was more exciting to me because, I needed, uh, help in actually finding a topic. . . . so it was more of like a thought process. . . . She was agreeing with me an helpin' me expand more on my ideas. . . . [and] she asked me some questions. By her asking me the questions she gave me, a little bit um, how do you say it, she gave me a little bit, more thought as to what I was really, basing my paper on. . . . so, that paper's a lot different.

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Although this issue of student-teacher difference in interpretation is warranting more and more of our attention, the bulk of the research done in this area focuses on task representation; see, for instance Prior (1991), Flower (1990), Nelson (1990), and Nespor (1987). There has been little research on differences in interpretation in oral interaction. Nonetheless there is evidence that this phenomenon may be quite common. For instance, in Walker and Elias' (1987) article analyzing the characteristics of successful vs. unsuccessful conferences, they mention that seven of the seventeen conferences they recorded were evaluated differently by the student and the teacher. Unfortunately we don't know why these students and teachers had such different interpretations since this research, like almost all the research done on conferencing, has taken as its starting point the researcher's analysis of a conference, sometimes triangulating against brief participant analyses, sometimes not. While I think that this mode of analysis is very useful, I believe that we can uncover further intricacies of one-to-one interaction by taking as a starting point not the researcher's but the participants' in-depth analyses of what happened, and triangulating that against the researcher's analysis. That's what I've done in this study.

The participants in this study were two teachers and two students in a basic writing program at a large Midwestern university. Both of the teachers, who I'll call Sally and Joan, had about three years of teaching experience, both had been on the university's list of excellent instructors, and both were white women in their mid-twenties. Both of the students, who I'll call Olanna and Kiesha, were black women in their first semester at the university. Olanna was Joan's student, and Kiesha was Sally's student.

After recording one focal conference between each of these student-teacher pairs, I interviewed each participant at length, both asking about their perceptions of that particular conference as well as eliciting information about the history of their interaction in general. I then transcribed and analyzed the interviews and the conferences and, as a supplement, collected the written work generated both in the conferences and as a result of the

conferences. I also conducted limited classroom observation and administered a survey about conferencing to all the students in both teachers' classes.

Here's a list of the types of differences in interpretation that I found. These differences, for the most part, were hidden; students and teachers weren't aware that they had different perceptions. Moreover, as this list illustrates, these differences in perception encompassed not only misunderstandings in which a student doesn't grasp a teacher's point, but also a much broader range of beliefs, assumptions, motives, and goals:

- unbeknownst to the teacher, the student doesn't understand something the teacher says
- unbeknownst to the student, the teacher doesn't understand why the student did something in her draft
- the student and the teacher don't have a mutual understanding of what the other one wants to accomplish, either in a particular conference or through conferencing in general
- even if they do understand and agree on what they should try to accomplish, they have different ideas of how to go about accomplishing it
- they don't agree on
    - what actually was accomplished in the conference
    - who should do how much talking and writing
    - who actually did how much talking and writing
    - what types of conferences are most helpful to the student
    - who might have done what differently to improve the conference
- they have different assumptions about the roles of a teacher and a student
- they have different interpretations of each other's personalities

Although these are just the differences in perception that occurred in my two case studies, I hope that this list illustrates the range of differences that might occur in other conferences.

In analyzing all these categories of differences, I found that:

- Many student-teacher differences in perception lead to, or were symptoms of, serious problems which interfered with or inhibited learning. These problems were especially insidious because teachers were unable to trace them back to their one-on-one interactions with students; indeed, the students and the teachers in this study were unaware that they had any differences in perception at all.

- Differences in perception occurred on different levels, which I will simplify by labeling "local" and "global." Surprisingly, serious and potentially long-term consequences can be traced back to local as well as to global differences.

First I'll argue that the students and teachers were unaware of their differences in interpretation and that these differences were problematic. Let's take another look at the quotes I opened up with. The teacher here is Joan and the student is Olanna. Since Joan says that she steered Olanna away from what Olanna was trying to talk about and Olanna says that Joan asked her questions and helped her expand on her ideas, it is pretty clear that they are unaware of their different interpretations of this conference.

While it may *seem* that this difference isn't a problem since, after all, the student was satisfied, I would argue that this difference *is* a problem—a big one. This is because, to really help our students, we need to know what helps them. If the teacher isn't aware of what helps the student, then any help she can give the student will be by chance—a sort of hit or miss situation. In this case, the teacher had an accidental hit; she helped the student. However, according to the both the student and the teacher, this conference was atypical. Here are their views of their typical interactions:

> T: [Olanna] generally has a positive attitude about the tutorial, you know. . . . I hope [our] conference[s] give her a stronger sense of, of herself. . . . She's one of the ones who can take her paper and really tell me, what she's done, that she'd like to do better, that, where she'd like to add information. She can really see that . . .
>
> S: The average conference is somewhat a little bit boring and, it's just . . . basically you have the material in front of you, an' you look over that material an', you look at her comments and, you add a few words in at that point in time, so . . . this is the fact with just . . . looking at the paper an', she's just tellin' me her comments, you know, we, just, it's, it's just boring.

Both the interpretations of their typical as well as their atypical interactions suggest that the Joan is unaware of what helps Olanna. So sometimes, as we saw, Joan may "accidentally" help Olanna, but, more often, she doesn't. In this context, I would argue that even a difference in interpretation which *seems* unproblematic, such as a teacher unknowingly helping a student, can sometimes be a symptom of a serious problem—a problem, moreover, that the teacher may be unaware of.

At this point, I'd like to shift the focus of my talk from my first finding to my second finding. I found not only that teachers and students can unknowingly have different and problematic interpretations, but that these interpretations occurred on different levels, which I'll simplify by labeling "local" and "global." Global differences in interpretation characterize an entire conference and, in some cases, may recur throughout subsequent conferences. The example I just discussed, for instance, was a global difference; it was not localized to just a few minutes of talk but rather encompassed all the conferences Joan and Olanna had that semester. Local differences in interpretation, on the other hand, are specific to a discussion of one particular topic in one particular conference. What was most surprising in my case studies was that even local differences often pointed to consequences far beyond the interaction which spawned them—consequences which, in some instances, may have greatly undermined the quality of the students' writing for some time to come. That is, even local differences, ephemeral as they were, had potentially long-term consequences. In the case of Sally and Kiesha, one such local difference occurred at the very beginning of the conference when Kiesha mentioned the relative lack of source material in the first draft of her research paper. Here's how Kiesha explained her lack of sources to Sally:

K: What I was showing you was my rough draft just first get all of it I have to say or, so that I won't need to plagiarize anyway
S: Gotcha
K: So now I'm gonna just add, like in, various places, the, uh, research that I have
S: M-humm
K: I mean, it's in there essentially, but just like, quotes or somethin'.
S: Okay [coughs]. Um [3 second pause] so what's your thesis, now, as of today?

Kiesha's explanation of the reason she didn't include source material is so brief that Sally misses it; Sally does not seem to understand that it was concern about plagiarizing that prevented Kiesha from fully using her sources. This interpretation is confirmed in my interview with Sally:

> I tried to make it clear in class that by this point, they really needed to have a full rough draft, and Kiesha did not. Like most other people in class did not have a full rough draft. She kinda came into tutorial saying, "Look, um, I just didn't get to put my sources in." Sources, not a very big part of the research paper! "Um, I just didn't get to put the sources in, but I wanted to put all my thoughts down."

But as Kiesha briefly implied in her conference with Sally, it wasn't that she "just didn't get to" put her sources in, as Sally believes, but rather that she made a considered decision not to use her sources so that everything in the draft could be "all hers." As Kiesha explained to me, prompted only by a general question about what she thought of her paper,

> I was kind of scared that I was gonna end up plagiarizing, or just, you know, sayin' exactly what they were sayin'. So, with my rough draft, I didn't put anything, any um, I think I like had two quotes in there. But everything in the rough draft was all mine. So I wanted to first get out what I had to say before, so I wouldn't get caught up with plagiarizing.

What Sally perceived as typical student ineptitude, then, was only Kiesha's desire to avoid something that Sally had been warning them against in class—plagiarism. Unfortunately, Sally's assumptions about student preparedness, coupled with the brevity with which Kiesha voiced her concern about plagiarizing, precluded Sally and Kiesha from having a common understanding of why Kiesha did not include sources in her draft.

This local difference in interpretation—even though it only characterized less than a minute of the conference—nonetheless may have contributed to serious and long-term consequences. There are two basic problems here: first, Sally was worried about sources. Second, Kiesha was worried about plagiarism. Neither of these concerns got addressed in this conference or in later conferences; what we have here, then, are two missed opportunities. Kiesha missed not only a chance to learn how to integrate sources into her writing but also a chance to learn how to avoid plagiarism. And, although the consequences of these missed opportunities beyond Sally's class are pure speculation, what happened in Sally's class is that Kiesha ended up turning in a final draft that was a list of claims; since she only considered how her sources fit into her paper *after* she had already written the body of her paper, she was unable to substantiate most of her argument.

Because this was the only research paper in Sally's class, and because it was the last paper of the semester, it is unlikely that Kiesha was able re-conceptualize how to use sources in her writing and or how to support her claims.

I want to emphasize at this point what I'm *not* claiming: I'm *not* claiming that these potentially long-term consequences are the result of the student-teacher interaction alone; Kiesha's problem as I see it was certainly not *born* in the conference. What I *am* suggesting is that Sally and Kiesha's difference in interpretation was an important symptom of a missed opportunity. I'm claiming that sometimes, perhaps, problems as substantial as Kiesha's only manifest themselves briefly in oral interaction; I'm suggesting that, quite possibly, our biggest symptom of this problem came and went during a few seconds of dialogue.

But the existence of such problems isn't the only reason it's important to identify differences in perception. Identifying these differences becomes especially essential if they are as common as I suspect they might be; since both student-teacher pairs in this study were unaware of their differences, how often might *other* students and teachers be unaware of *their* differences? I'm not saying that the students and teachers that I studied are representative, because their interactions were shaped by very specific sets of situations. But I would point out that any human interaction is complicated by its own unique contexts—contexts which, because they will necessarily be different for the student than they will for the teacher, will almost certainly shape each one's perceptions in different ways. Thus although the specific differences in perception that I've discussed are unique, I would argue that they illustrate the potential for other students and teachers to also experience different perceptions of their interactions—perceptions that they, like the students and teachers in my study, may well be unaware of.

If students and teachers really do, unbeknownst to them, experience these differences in perception in oral interaction more often than we might have thought, then what does that suggest about *written* interaction, which most of us assume to be even *more*

fraught with the potential for misunderstanding? Consider, on this note, a quote from Olanna:

> The advantages of [conferences over written comments are that], you get to . . . communicate better an' know what a teacher really expects from you, instead of, lookin' at a paper. And you can . . . question it as well, instead o' just accepting it. So, um, I think it's, I think it's I'd rather, to the advantage. . . . [Conferencing] lessens confusion, among the student an' teacher. An' it gets them [at] least, [to] know what each other is thinking and, what they're each looking for.

While I don't agree with Olanna that conferences always allow students and teachers to know what "each other is thinking," I do agree that conferences tend to lessen confusion and allow students and teachers to communicate better. That this communication is by no means perfect—even in conferencing—suggests that no matter how we respond to our students, the potential is always there for meanings to be constructed in ways that we never intended, expected, or imagined.

Given this potential, identifying student-teacher differences in interpretation may provide a useful framework through which to improve our pedagogies; it may provide a lens through which we can start to identify some of the barriers which inhibit our students' learning. It is only by identifying these barriers to learning, after all, that we can begin to find ways to tear them down. Of course we won't be able to identify and address all of these barriers, but I believe that we will be better able to seize, rather than miss, opportunities to teach our students if we conceptualize differences in interpretation as a framework through which we might deepen our understanding of the many and complex ways that students and teachers construct meanings out of their interactions.

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